

***Listen to Me, Babie: Teaching Poetry to Children in the Muncie
Community***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

In 2017, the National Endowment for the Arts reported that only 12 percent of adults read poetry in the last year. From my experience, many people that I've spoken to about poetry would describe it as academic, boring, and difficult to understand. In my studies over the past four years, I've found that poetry is deeply emotional, constantly surprising, and not afraid to break the rules. In this creative project, I tried to share my love of poetry with a group of students at the Motivate Our Minds after-school program in Muncie, Indiana. Over the course of the semester, we read works from established poets, talked what poetry is and what it can do, and tried to write some of our own pieces. Although difficult at times, the meetings of the poetry club were a rewarding experience, teaching me many things about myself and about how to share my love of poetry with others.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank professor Mark Neely for advising me through this project. His knowledge and assistance, as well as his passion for spreading a love of poetry to others, has been a source of inspiration for me throughout my time at Ball State University. I would also like to thank the academic director at Motivate Our Minds, Linda Rose, and all of the wonderful staff and volunteers for allowing me to spend time with the students in the program. Most of all, I would like to thank the students in my poetry club for consistently inspiring me, as well as for putting in their best effort to create some wonderful pieces of writing.

I'm grateful to my family for their endless encouragement and support. I'm also grateful for the most wonderful friends I could ask for, Shelby and Alex, for walking with me every step of this wild and precious journey. I would finally like to thank all of my creative writing professors who taught me and encouraged me over the past four years. None of this would have been possible without them.

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Process Analysis Statement

When I first started thinking about what I wanted to do for my thesis, I thought of the subject that I had been passionate about since the first creative writing class I took in college: poetry. I had learned a little bit about poetry in middle school and high school, but it had never really clicked with me until college. I thought of poetry as something to be hacked apart and analyzed in order to find that deeper, “correct” meaning that would get me an A on my papers. It was bad enough that I didn’t enjoy reading it, but when I was tasked with writing it I found myself at a complete loss. I didn’t know what the rules to this genre were. I didn’t even know what poetry *was*. All I knew was that it was boring, difficult, and written exclusively by old men in the twentieth century.

In my first creative writing class in college, Introduction to Creative Writing, we began with the poetry unit. My professor told us that poetry is at the root of all other kinds of writing, and in order to learn how to write fiction and nonfiction pieces, we had to first learn how to write poetry. On the screen in the front of the classroom, she projected Billy Collins’ “Introduction to Poetry”:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

As time went on, I began to understand exactly what Billy Collins meant by this poem. I came to appreciate the wonderful ambiguity that comes with not knowing exactly what poetry is, or all that it can be. I settled on the idea that “poetry is,” period. I came to love it for its ability to twist language in ways I did not know it could twist. I love it for disregarding meaning in favor of the way words feel in the mouth. I love it for voicing our fears, our regrets, our joys, and the moments that make us catch our breath. Inside of the classroom, I met many people who were excited about poetry. Outside of the classroom, I found people who had never been able to move past the view of poetry they had been taught in school. They still found it difficult and boring, but they felt that the people who read and wrote it were a part of an exclusive and pretentious club that they were not invited to join. I knew that this was not what poetry was about at all! It was a joyous and affecting celebration of our shared human experience, and everyone should get to take part in that!

For my final thesis, I wanted to try to share a love of poetry with people who might feel that poetry is exclusionary towards them. It seemed to me that the best place to start was with kids. I wanted to try to get to them before school taught them that it was academic and boring and formulaic, because I know that it is anything but. I contacted a few different people and finally got a chance to talk with the academic director at Motivate Our Minds, an after-school program near Ball State. I planned to come to the program for an hour every Monday afternoon and teach a group of students how to read and write poetry.

During the fall semester, in November, I went to the IRB Office and spoke to the graduate assistants about getting IRB approval for my project. They told me that since this was a creative project, I did not need approval from the IRB to conduct it. I then began to plan some lessons and read books that I thought would help me teach the kids and make the most of my time there.

On the first day I visited Motivate Our Minds, I planned several activities I thought would be a good introduction to the fun side of poetry. I had read the book *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* by Kenneth Koch, and in his book the children were imaginative, thoughtful, well-behaved and excited about the lessons that he planned for them. I went into the first lesson not anticipating any challenges with the kids. However, life rarely happens without challenges, and the first lesson turned out to be much more difficult than I thought it would be.

I wanted to begin with a game in which we introduced ourselves, but I planned to incorporate elements of rhythm, rhyme, and syllable counting. It was a chanting game in which the student would say, “My name is (X)” and the other students would call back, “Yeah!” The student would then say something that they liked to do or something that they were, such as, “I am a poet,” or “I like to paint,” but it had to be between four and five syllables. The next two “lines” also had to be between four and five syllables, but the final line had to rhyme with the second line. I imagined the kids working hard on their little chants and cheering enthusiastically for their classmates when they came up with a good rhyme. I handed out pieces of paper and asked them to begin writing, fully expecting them to start furiously scribbling their wonderful, insightful poems. There were, however, some major differences between Kenneth Koch’s classroom and mine. Koch performed his lessons in a controlled classroom during the school day, when the teacher was present and the kids knew what was expected of them. I performed my lessons in an after-school program, when the kids had already been sitting in school all day and were understandably frustrated that they had to do “more learning” at 4:30 PM—and that it was *poetry*, probably one of the lessons in school they found the most boring. I was also the only adult among at least 10 high-energy kids, and I had not earned their respect in any way, so they didn’t feel obligated to listen to my instructions.

Koch had written that he allowed the kids to talk amongst themselves as loudly as they wanted while they were working, but that was simply impossible in my club. The noise level soon

rose to yelling, and then the kids were out of their seats and chasing each other around the room. I wanted to take a loose, relaxed approach with my club, so the kids didn't feel like they were in school, but on the very first day I found myself yelling at them. After the first activity failed, I read aloud to them from a book of children's poetry and handed out art supplies so that they could try to illustrate some of the similes and metaphors within the poems. I soon realized that you can't really make them draw anything they don't want to draw, and that they would much rather just doodle rather than listen to the poems I was reading. I left that poetry club feeling frustrated and foolish to think that the kids would have any reason to pay attention to me. I knew that I would have to totally change my tactics if I wanted any of the other poetry clubs to go better.

There was one glimmer of hope I tried to hold onto so I didn't give up completely before the second lesson. One student was acting out so much while I was asking the kids to write, I told her that if she didn't want to participate in the lesson she didn't have to be in the club. Immediately she pouted and said, "I've just never done this before. I don't know how." It occurred to me then that the kids weren't acting out simply because they didn't want to be there or because they didn't like me; they were probably unsure about how to do any of the things I was asking them to do and afraid of failing in front of their classmates. That gave me hope that if I just stuck with it and showed them that poetry doesn't have to be difficult or scary (that it can actually be the opposite of those things) they would start to enjoy the club and the activities more.

Before my second visit to Motivate Our Minds, I went to Bracken Library and checked out a few different books with ideas for poetry activities. I knew now that Kenneth Koch was teaching a whole different brand of kids, and that my kids needed much more stimulation in order to pay attention. I took a few ideas from the books I got from the library and decided to do an activity that would engage the kids' senses. I wanted them to realize that poetry isn't really stuffy and boring; it's a game of noticing and associating. I brought in a few different items that I thought would trigger

the senses: some cooked spaghetti noodles, essential oils, and a makeup brush. I asked them to close their eyes while they touched or smelled the items, and then tell me how they would describe them. I had them write some of their words on the board, and they seemed to be excited about that. I decided that I would need to incorporate activities that got the kids out of their chairs and moving around the room, since they didn't like to sit much anyways. We had a much more successful poetry club that day, producing a word map and a poem about noodles that we wrote together. Most of all, I was learning how to make poetry club an enjoyable experience for the kids and teach them something at the same time.

Throughout the course of the semester, we had good times and bad times at poetry club. Some Mondays, I dreaded going and ended up having a great time. Other Mondays, I looked forward to it all day and ended the club frustrated and upset. There were challenges we had to overcome, and there are a lot of things that I wish I had been able to do better so that I could really share my love of poetry with the kids. Some of the biggest challenges I had were some of the most important aspects of the club: which poems to read to the kids, and how to get them to write.

I wanted to be able to read some experimental, exciting works in poetry club, but one of my biggest obstacles was that there were kids of all different ages who attended. The youngest member I had was in kindergarten, and the oldest in eighth grade. "Member" was a flexible word, because although I tried to make sure the same group of kids came every time, that was difficult due to the nature of the program. When we did fun things like make slime or have an egg hunt, more members would attend. When we used our time to read aloud and write, the numbers dwindled. Still, at most club meetings there were a variety of age ranges, and I wanted to make sure that the poetry we read was appropriate and understandable for all of them. As a result, I think that I ended up showing them poems that were not very mature and didn't take a lot of risks. I tried to show them that poetry

was more than the “boring things” they read in school, but through this club I realized *why* we read all the boring stuff in school: it is so difficult to find poetry that is appropriate for children!

I tried to solve this problem in a variety of different ways, but finally I decided that I would show them slam poetry. I knew it would be dynamic and entertaining, and that it would make them ask questions about what poetry is. I started with Nate Marshall’s “Chi Kid,” because Marshall does a great job of demonstrating how a poem can be carried just on rhythm and rhyme. Near the end some of the kids started to lose interest because it’s difficult to keep up with every word he’s saying in the video, but most of them stuck with it all the way through. When it was over, one of the kids turned to me and said, “*That’s* poetry?” This was exactly the reaction I was hoping for, and I explained to him that slam poetry came about because some poets started to feel that poetry was getting a little too rigid, academic, and white. Slam poets tried to reclaim some of that space. I would have liked to read to them from Nate Marshall’s book, *Wild Hundreds*, but I struggled to find any poems that would be completely appropriate for the students in my club. Instead, I just showed them the book and told them that being a writer was possible for all of them, if they worked hard and were passionate about it. After we watched a few more videos of slam poets, some of them even started freestyling a few of their own pieces.

Slam poetry was one of my more successful ideas, but there were many more times during the course of the semester when we just ended up reading children’s poetry books. This was mostly okay because not only were the kids different ages, but they all had very different reading levels. This, at times, also became a challenge. One time, I was passing around a poem and each of the kids were reading one stanza. Some of the kids needed more help than others, but they were all doing fine. I told them that if they read a stanza they would get a piece of candy (bribery helped me more than anything during my time in poetry club) so they were all eager to try. When it got around to one of the girls, she just stared at the page. I started to help her by pointing to the first word, “what,”

and asking her to say the word, since at her age and level in school it would typically be an easy sight-word. She stared at the page for a few more seconds and then said, “I don’t know.” It was then that I realized the mistake I had made: I had put this sweet little girl on the spot in front of all of her peers and asked her to read a passage, which everyone else had proven they could do, and she would not be able to do it. I felt especially terrible about this because I know how important approval from your peers is during school, and how hurtful it is when you’re not fully accepted by them. We struggled through one line and I gave her a piece of candy and moved on, but I learned something important from her about not assuming students’ abilities or putting them on the spot.

I expected that the kids would teach me about the different possibilities in poetry during my time at Motivate Our Minds, but instead they taught me more about myself. I learned that it was easy to get frustrated with the kids, or to yell at them to sit and listen, but it was much harder to understand why they were acting a certain way or where they were coming from. When I did take the time to look deeper into why they might be acting out, it became much easier to solve the problem. They taught me to be more empathetic, both towards them and in my everyday life. Although it often drove me crazy, they also taught me that it’s better to be flexible and to try to have as much fun as possible when you can. Often, our train went off the rails during poetry club and we didn’t write as much as I would have liked to. I had a vision before I started this club of ten calm children bent over their pages, writing masterpieces. Looking back, I realize how ridiculous of an expectation that was. It was impossible to *make* them write poetry, and the most that I could do was try to explain to them that poetry was something to be excited about. I hope that even if I didn’t totally convince them to love poetry, I planted a seed for some of them. I hope that one day one of those kids will stumble across a book of poetry or see a flyer advertising a reading and they won’t feel that it’s a book or a space that isn’t meant for them. I hope they’ll check it out. Not everyone loves poetry, and I realize that now. However, everyone should have a chance.

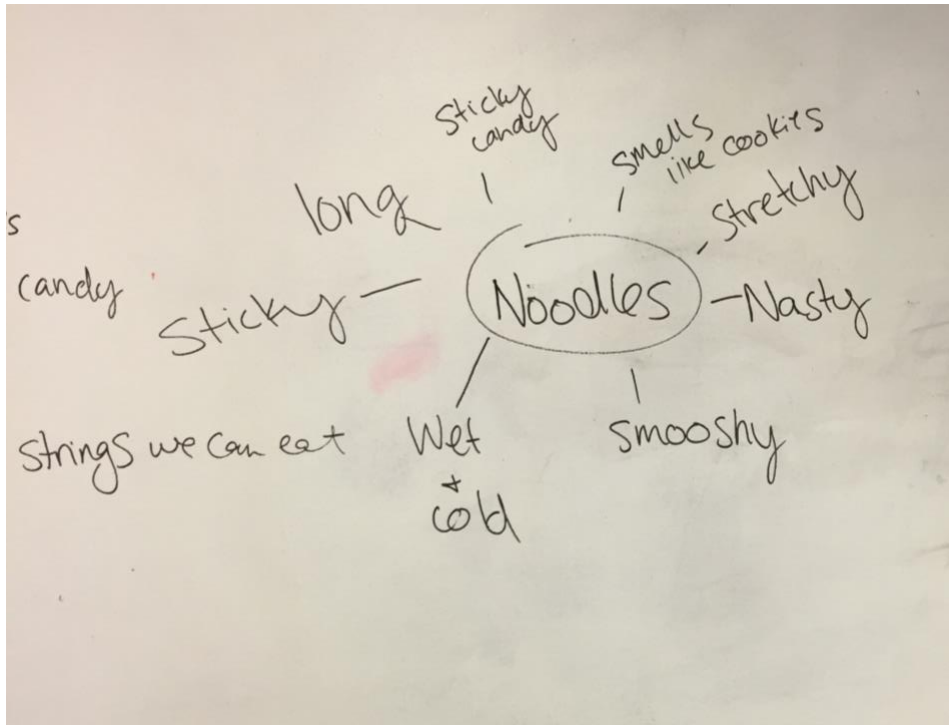
Documentation of Sources

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Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. Harper Perennial, 1972.

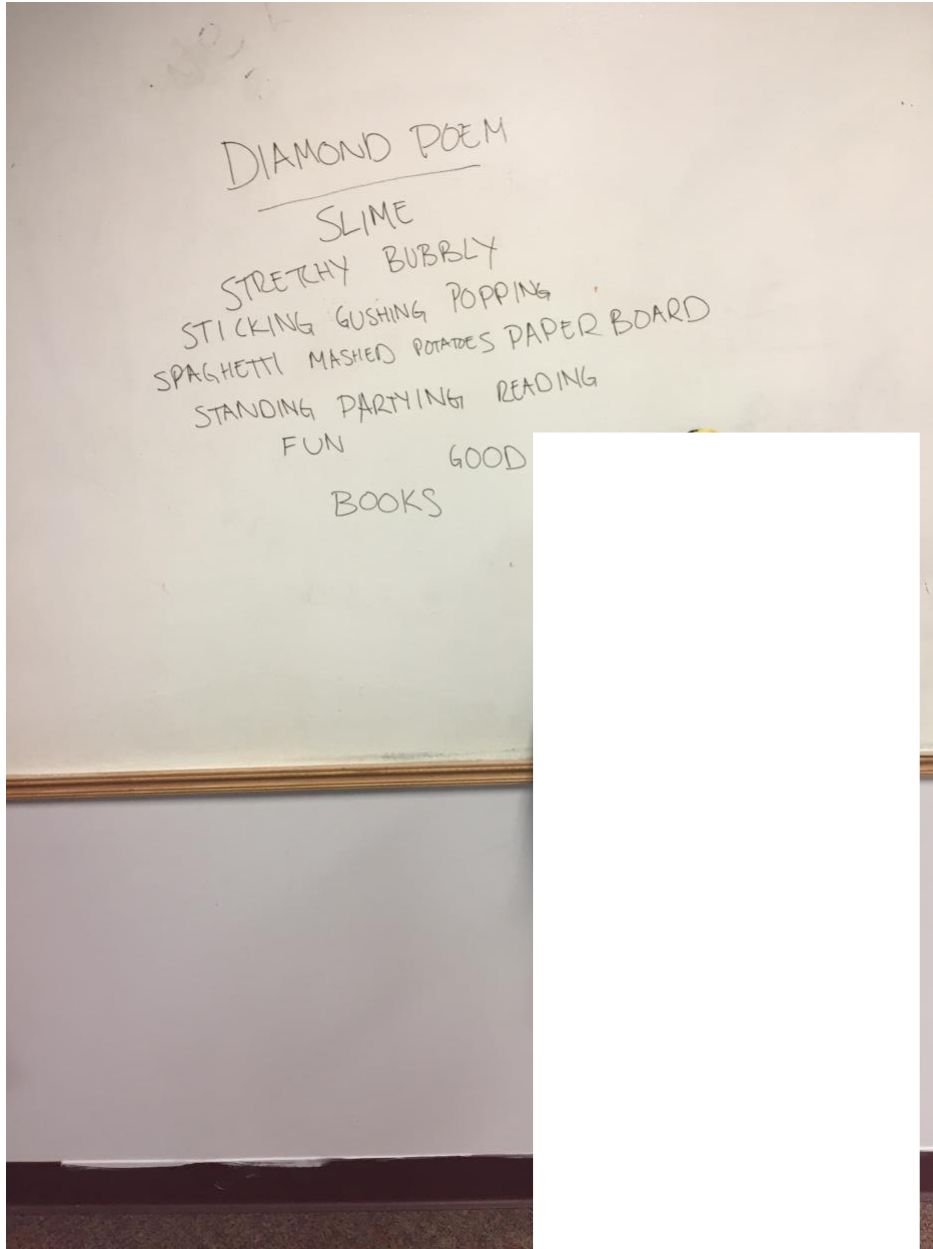
Morice, Dave. *The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet: 104 Unusual Ways to Write Poetry in the Classroom and the Community*. Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1995.

Photographs of Group Poems and Word Maps

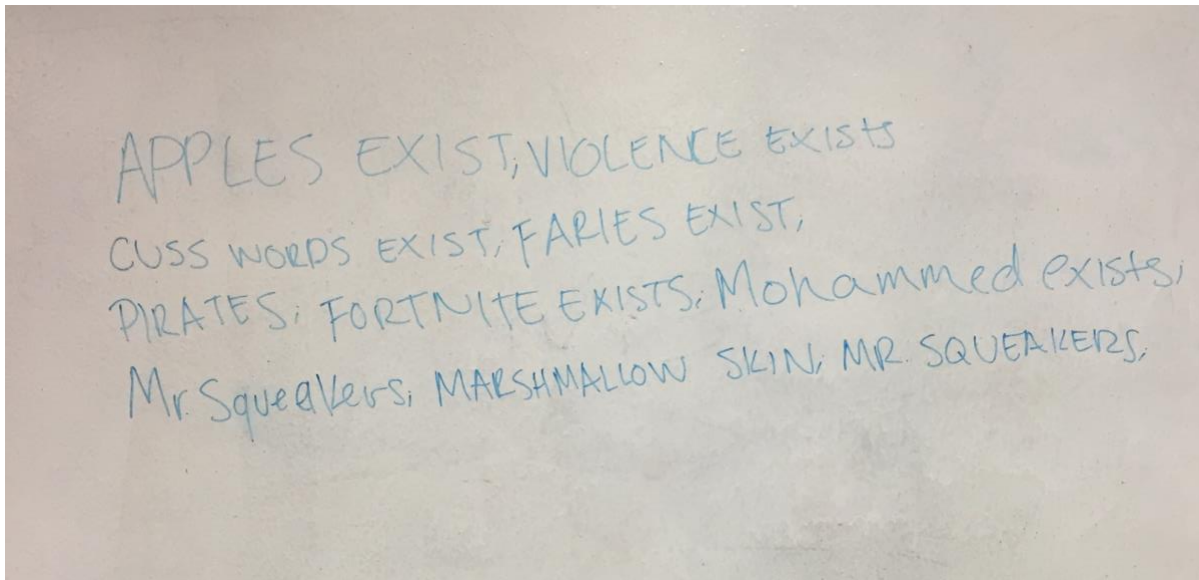


The noodles, oodles, poodles
Noodles are like snakes
Noodles smell like cookies
Noodles feel like sticky candy
Noodles feel like sushi
Noodles look like shoe strings we can eat

Our word map on cooked spaghetti noodles inspired the group poem, "The Noodles, Oodles, Poodles."



We used our lesson on making slime to write a group "diamond poem," which puts two opposite things together using vivid descriptions. The kids decided that they wanted the opposite of slime to be books, and they described both of them in this poem.

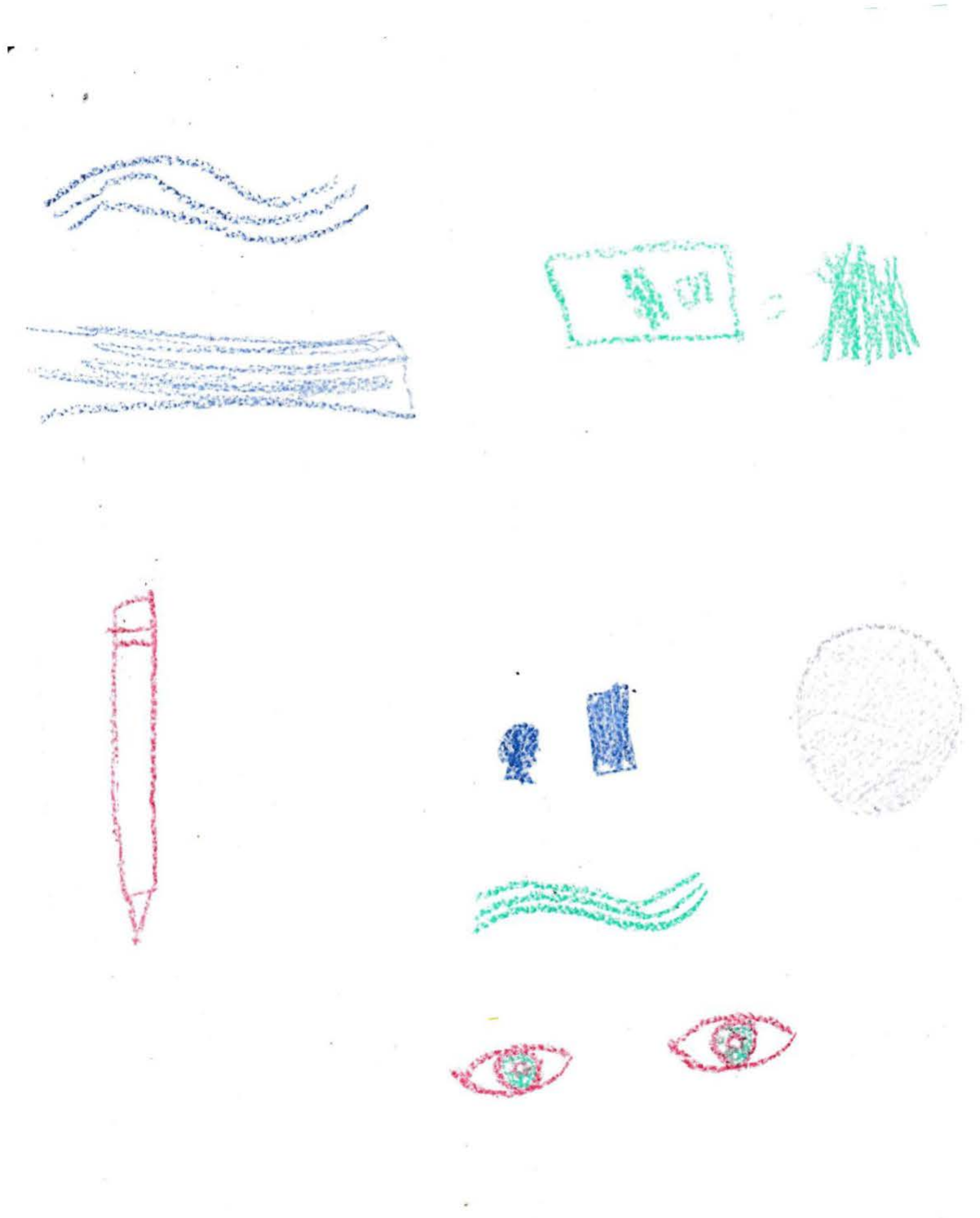


Here is my favorite group poem that we wrote together. I took inspiration from a book of poetry I was reading at the time, Inger Christensen's *Alphabet*, in which the author writes poems about things that exist. I gave the kids each a letter, and I asked them to come up with something that exists and begins with that letter. Here is the poem they wrote:

Apples exist, violence exists,
cuss words exist, fairies exist,
pirates, Fortnite exists, Mohammed exists,
Mr. Squeakers, marshmallow skin, Mr. Squeakers.

Student Work

On the first day of poetry club, I read a poem aloud and asked the students to illustrate some of the images they heard. Many of their drawings turned out very abstract, and I really enjoyed looking at them. Here are some of my favorites:







In order to get the students thinking about ways to use noise in their poems, I played an audio recording of a street in New York City and asked them to write what they heard. Here are some of their pieces:

I hear wind I hear Boom

Daniel

I hear people talking and foot steps

I hear some people talking about kfc

I hear a scooters I hear a train station

I hear a van I hear a car horn

I hear scooter talking, I hear
cars I heard a train booming.

I hear the bell of school,

I hear and beabing
hoys I hear winds
skotos and triah
I hear corg
I hear bikes
childrin ruhing
pepie
I hear Bus and
bells

AGJU

my FRIEND Bear
Helive in COUNTRY
Then He move to the
cite and today
He move!

Nairobi.

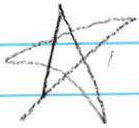
People talking on the sidewalk

KFC wants over 1000 dollars
in cash.

People walking on the squeaky
floor.

I hear wind.

I hear People taking.



I hear a train.

I hear car cash's.

I hear People.

I hear People laughing.

I hear wind it sound like thutter

I hear People taking the train.

I hear motorcycle going room-
room. I hear the microphone boing
like boom boom

Amanda

Poetry Class

Krystal

In the morning I heard noises.
Noises such as street lights
and car doors, honking and wind
whistling I heard buses passing
by and people speaking I
heard children running and music
playing I heard people rushing
and running I heard rain claps
on my windows and motorcycles
going. What did you hear?
Write it here _____!

Two of these sound poems, written by older members of the club, really impressed me, because they used the sounds to create a story:

Carmelita

bus and a swing, people, horns,
Big bang, cars, Tronics, motorcycles,
people talking, Thump, walking
dress shoes,

I ran into a bus
my momma cussed
She ask if I was ok
I told her okay,
How to growl
To the store
mobile Hamburgers
No sunlight to ignore
Don't chase my mom
Through the mobs

I promise to the store
res parent will ignore
Saw a hot dog c
Going crazy
listen to me babe

Part 11

People bikes, trans bus stopping
seems brakes, horns, Big bang, ~~big~~
gas puffs, motors, people talking
thunder stamp in dress
shoes

I went to new York
I rode a bike

I was going to the bathroom
to stop a song while the
roof leaked on my shoulder
so I got in this tired
+ the full of love of sleep

Oh no I went the bathroom
because my stomach was
empty and so I stop to take
so I could be eating
fish & wine

After a particularly difficult poetry club, where the students were finding it hard to pay attention or follow instructions, I found this little piece of paper on one student's desk. I was touched by the sentiment and also by the fact that the student chose to write an apology in poem form.

